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Representation of Environmental Catastrophe in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Abstract: Nature and literature have always been inseparable. Nature in a world of hyper-technologism, Transcendentalism, Ecofeminism, dystopia and apocalypse are some of the key areas that the American nature writers of today deal with. This paper aims at rendering an ecocentric reading of Cormac McCarthy's post- apocalyptic novel, *The Road*. It is the telling of a journey and the bond between a father and son in the after of a nuclear cataclysm and the time and space that frost with the ecological disaster. Set in a dystopian environment, the novel reveals an austere environment and nihilism throughout. It projects the confusion and disorder through terror and great anxiety onto nature - or rather what is left of it. It reiterates the simple lessons that nature teaches mankind with a few instances from the novel. This paper focuses on how nature is prioritized in an ironical setting, a bleak environment and also how the rejection of nature, epitomizes the abundance of nature that is unrevealed.

Keywords: *devastation of earth, environmental apocalypse, dystopian future*

The relationship between man and nature has ever been influenced by literature; Time and again, many ways have been inherited to portray the American landscape in literature. While stalwarts of America like Thoreau and Emerson established nature lessons with a Transcendentalist vision through their works, *The Road* depicts them with Nature unpronounced in a post- apocalyptic era. This paper is an attempt to reveal the environmental apocalypse in *The Road* and how it is suggestive of ecocentric elements in the novel.

Buell writes, “Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal”. *The Road* is a 2006 novel which narrates the journey of a father and a son in a dystopian future. The journey is on a devastated land, probably by a man- made disaster, a nuclear holocaust. Time and place do not make any sense in this setting. The landscape is packed with ash and is devoid of living animals and vegetation. Human survivors have resorted to cannibalism, hunting the debris of city for food. With the only hope to find a land worth living, the two progress toward an unnamed or unknown ‘south’.

Scott Russel Sanders says, “The gospel of ecology has become an intellectual common place. But it is not yet an emotional one”. An admirer of Wordsworth’s poetry or Emerson’s Nature may receive an intellectual insight but *The Road* rejects the divinity and positive vibe from nature as it portrays a world sans nature. An ecocentric reading of the novel may enable a reader to be emotionally influenced by ecological thoughts to make world a better place to live.

Undoubtedly, *The Road* is reminiscent of The Waste land. It is claimed to have been the first of McCarthy’s works to treat him as a nature critic. The civilization in the world is lost. There

is suspicion and mistrust against nature and fellow men. The opening lines of the novel portray how bleak the environment is.

When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him. Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. (Road, 3)

They awake in darkened woods everyday. The two neither choose to remain in the woods or communicate with nature. If at all they do, it is done only for a survival. There is no immortal beauty seen in *The Road*. It is "Barren, silent and godless" (Road, 4). More than a description of desolated wasteland, it is suggestive of the impact of that the careless attitude of man towards nature may bring in to this world. It is clear that there is irrevocable separation, a separation of man from nature and this idea hints apocalypse in that devastated world:

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The name of birds. Finally the names of things one believed to be true ... The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (Road, 53)

Sullivan states, "this anti-Edenic passage, word and thing, the union of logos and world, has been rent asunder. The pastoral covenant which places God's word onto the tongues of humans is broken". It is a critic on a nation with boundless limits as lush green 'second garden of Eden'.

Mathew Carbery rightly points out the recurrent theme of omnipresent death of nature in McCarthy's fiction. He says, "McCarthy's pessimism is not directed at nature but man." It is all about the poor vision of mankind as humans do not care for the environment. Devastation of earth is a recurrent theme in Ecocriticism. The landscape is unleashed with grey ash and cinders covering the environment. Colours are present but only in the nostalgic memories of the characters or in the form of bloodshed.

The world is ruined. “He dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to wake himself from just such siren worlds” (Road, 15). The barrenness of the landscape and the effects of apocalypse in a post- industrialized world are explicit in the above lines. It is the conflict of man versus environment, with the old civilization providing tools. The father and son must scavenge for food and other vital supplies.

The author says, “Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world.” (Road, 3) The ‘glaucoma’ mentioned may either refer to the literal darkness around the protagonists or it even metaphorically suggests how man has become blind towards nature. The seemingly hostile world in the novel is not what nature has done to mankind but what humans did to the environment in the name of industrialization and urbanization. The images which were once the symbols of fertility and progeny were then turned to a notion of death. The father believes that falcons, birds and colours are symbols of death. Most of the lives have already been destroyed by nuclear holocaust and the remaining people battle against the extreme weather, natural disasters like earthquake as well to survive.

The change in adverse weather condition is also an impact of what man did to environment. The two often wear a mask to cover themselves from the unfriendly air, ash and dust. They also cover themselves with a canister mask and a biohazard suit to protect themselves from epidemic ailments. The father speaks of his poor health condition as he suffers respiratory disorder. And even towards the end of the novel he dies of respiratory ailment caused by the industrial pollution.

There are a few nature lessons that the novel instills. The reader is free to draw sociological lessons as well from the journey across. The coco-cola episode in the novel is another instance for a consumerist society. The novelist employs it as a warning against the

inevitable fall of demoralized values and it remains as a satire to criticize the post- modern and a capitalist American society.

Conclusion:

McCarthy gives us a violent imagery throughout and but an occasional reprieve. With nothingness spelt out in every phrase, the novel idealizes the abundance in nature which the future generations may lose if exploited.

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (Road, 306)

And the above lines are a merely a hope and nostalgic yearning to retrieve the land of bliss which was once true. In the novel of end times and eschatology, the characters hope to find some traces of some civilization, perhaps an improved climate or a more stable and secure environment.

Future catastrophe does not give anyone any special ability to foretell the future. But it does encourage a writer to engage his past with the present behaviour as kinds of world to be created. Learning from the past for the better future is the ultimate lesson taught in the novel. Because every story is told to keep track with the virtuous past and retold as catastrophe is not to be repeated.

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